

## 9/18/13 Coolidge Corner Open Spaces Walk

Notes to File - K. Brewton

Attendees: Derrick Choi, Carla Benka, Sean Lynn-Jones, Frank Caro, Erin Gallentine, David Leschinsky, Sharad Chand (for the first part of the site walk), Andy Martineau, Kara Brewton. Sharad Chand, Manager of the Marriott joined us for the first part of the walk. Although not available for this day, Jean Stringham did the same walk with Kara the week before so that her thoughts could be brought up in the group's discussion.

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### SUMMARY

Following Economic Development's Commercial Vibrancy Study outreach, we realized how important it would be to conduct a small focus group where various stakeholders could observe the same Coolidge Corner open spaces at the same time in order to help answer the question, "How can we make Coolidge Corner more vibrant?"

Other Initiatives independent of discussions related to private & public open spaces are also underway to answer this question, i.e., marketing, events, publicity, parking, adapting individual retailers to "activity-based" shopping, etc. However, many of these efforts are very dependent on public and semi-public spaces that are welcoming, well-maintained, easy to physically navigate, safe, clearly marked for information about the area, adaptable for different needs and temporary programming, and interesting.

To be successful in achieving these goals, we must encourage participation and assistance from volunteers and/or sponsorship outside of Town government. This informal walk included a mix of residents, employees, business owners that spend a lot of time in Coolidge Corner; Town Meeting and Advisory members from the Capital and Planning subcommittees; open space advocates; clean streets advocates; urban design architect and EDAB member; Director of Parks & Open Space; and Economic Development staff.

Observations, discussion, and photos about individual spaces follow this summary.

### Next Steps:

1. Economic Development staff (ED) will further ideas with private property owners for renovating and integrating the Marriott triangle and its relationship to the public open space within the Marriott courtyard and the private open space at Beacon Park.
2. ED will hire a civil engineer/landscape architect to further conceptual drawings for a renovated Coolidge Corner East parking lot, including discussions with Parks on how to make better use of a green spine extending from the Theatre alleyway across to the Centre Street west parking lot.
3. ED will ask EDAB to spearhead group of architects/landscape architects that could assist shopkeepers in adopting small public spaces outside or near their store, using Jean & Frank's

work as inspiration. Additionally, ED will talk with Merchants Associations about sponsoring adopting maintenance and/or programming for small public open spaces.

4. ED will coordinate with Parks & Open Space (Parks) and Health & Human Services Department (Health) to further ideas to better utilize and alleviate existing rodent problems for small MBTA-owned space between Khao Sarn and Michael's Deli.
5. The low fencing around the tree pits is concluded to be very effective against compaction of soils. However, Parks will work with ED and potentially Merchants Associations to expand some of these tree pits into an adjacent parking space for a parklet pilot program – where spaces are converted temporarily to small parks, creating an inviting focus for the street.
6. Parks will further ideas and design for rehabilitating the little park at the edge of the John Street parking lot. No further rehab design/changes are planned for the triangle park at Pleasant & Beacon Street; this may be more appropriate with any redevelopment of the Durgin & Waldo garages.
7. When the School department is ready to discuss specific Devotion School designs, Parks and ED will provide suggestions on ways that open space could be better used for the area.
8. David (Eureka Puzzles) will further pursue installing a chess table and chairs outside Eureka, potentially as a pilot to have other shopkeepers follow his lead in making a more vibrant Coolidge Corner.
9. David (also Chair of the Coolidge Corner Merchants Association) will continue to lead new programming and events in the area that could more creatively use some of these open spaces.

## **Marriott Triangle between Webster & Beacon Streets, Beacon Park, & Marriott Courtyard**

### Observations & Discussion:

- The Baptist/Methodist Church bell located at Beacon Park has no historical markings for why it's there, what it's history is. It is not visible from public space, and does not seem to be enjoyed by anyone or appropriately sited.
- Some of the triangle area is well kept, and some is not. We saw evidence of both Beacon Park & Marriott workers taking care of some of the space, but not comprehensively.
- The granite benches are hardly ever used by anyone; the wooden slat benches are used often.
- There are multiple curving lines formed by curbing nearest Beacon Street, which could probably be redesigned.
- The pavers seem to be fine.
- The kiosk is the least visible of the three Town-owned kiosks. The shelf on the bottom usually collects trash more than it is useful for providing paper brochures. Maintenance of graffiti and vandalism is an ongoing issue for all the kiosks, but this one in particular.
- Maybe a fabric membrane could be installed to provide acoustic balancing for outdoor musicians.
- Concrete deck at Beacon Park is woefully underutilized. Are the raised planters needed on the concrete deck? The full height of the wall between it and the triangle that acts as a visual barrier to the Marriott Courtyard park?
- The Courtyard park has great outdoor seating for eating. Maybe we need to be more careful of the entrance being blocked by vehicles, and/or signage and visual cues that welcome the public in?
- Covered trash cans here don't work as well as the open cans elsewhere on Beacon because people don't like to touch the trash can surfaces.

### Big Ideas:

- Would be fun for different (pleasant) sounds to be present throughout Coolidge Corner – maybe musicians, maybe interactive kiosks, maybe sounds that you trigger when walking by a space, etc.
- Moveable seating would be wonderful to try out in Coolidge Corner.
- The kiosks should be replaced overtime with modern technology that is more flexible in its signage, and perhaps more user-interactive (when the price drops more significantly and when the time comes to renovate this structures).

### Next Steps (Economic Development lead):

- Better understand and find/create documentation of which private parties maintain which public spaces
- Explore integrated open space ideas with Marriott and Beacon Park owners



Entry way to public park within Marriott Courtyard



Photo of Marriott Triangle from Beacon Street – note person using wooden bench behind the granite benches, bike locked to tree, and poor visibility of kiosk. Can you tell there's a public park steps away?



Bell, raised planters at concrete deck (which covers parking garage beneath), adjacent to Beacon Park building.



View from Beacon Park deck down towards entryway of public park at Marriott courtyard.





View from Beacon Park deck down towards public park and seating at Marriott courtyard.



Concrete deck continues at Beacon Park; only apparent use is for a small bike rack.

## **Beacon Street Sidewalk near Eureka! Puzzles & Games**

### Observations & Discussion:

- Discussed the amount of room that tree pits take up on sidewalk, the low iron fencing that protects the tree pits, and whether it's easy for people to get around the fencing from the passenger side of vehicles. We saw the need for tree fencing later in the walk (see photo on next page) with exposed tree roots and bare soil area. Noted that walking around the fencing was especially difficult in the winter when snow mounds were built up as well.
- As a pilot program, could temporary parklets be built out INTO parking spaces from where there are tree pits? The group brainstormed on ways that those travelling by car and walking over the tree pits conflict with each other.
- With current configuration of stationary Beacon Street benches, it is hard to have a conversation or eat a quick lunch together. Often see one person sitting and one standing talking to them because it is a difficult configuration to hold a conversation. Others noted the configuration works well for wheelchair / non-wheelchair conversation.
- Could seat benches cantilever over the tree pit, still letting rain through, but taking up less concrete space?
- Suggested that maybe seats should be adjacent to storefronts, as along this part of Beacon there seems to be plenty of width.
- Eureka! Is pursuing ideas of having movable seating and a chess table open to the public
- Maybe seats that fold up like theatre seats "jump seats" could be installed on building facades, where they could be out of the way when not needed.

### Big Ideas:

- The Town should make it easier and more predictable for when businesses could be permitted to add windowboxes, planters, or seats open to the public where it benefits the Town as a whole

### Next Steps (Parks lead):

- Consider tree fencing, parking, and parklets design in upcoming maintenance rounds and in upcoming request for temporary installation of parklets

### Next Steps (David lead):

- Pursue chess table idea with ED staff assistance



To fence or not to fence?



Bare tree pit and exposed tree roots where protective fencing was not installed, just east of Trader Joe's on Beacon Street. The uneven surface causes a tripping hazard.



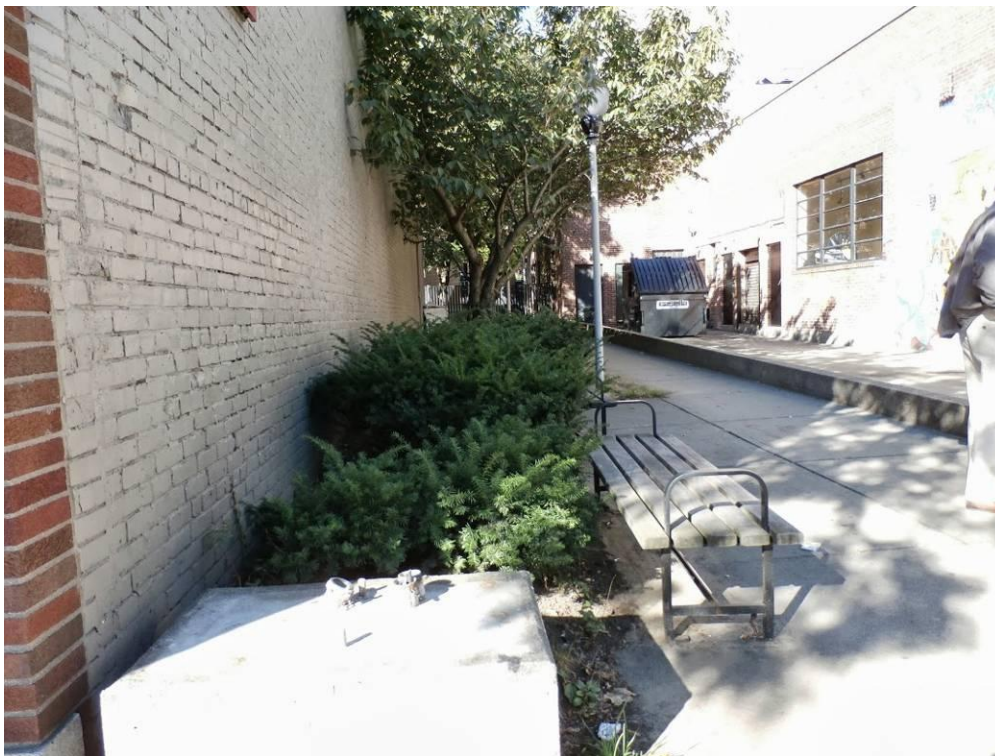
### **MBTA property on Harvard St between Khoa Sarn & Michael's Deli**

#### Observations & Discussion:

- New location of bus stop in front of Michael's Deli is not ideal for his business; maybe he would appreciate more seating (as well as Khoa Sarn) if the area between buildings was cleaned up (yews removed because of existing problems with rodents), and moveable seating was there.
- Maybe more paving and lighting; water feature?
- Maybe a small skate zone instead?
- [Note that mural was funded by Brookline community Foundation. Ask Jennifer Lanier 617-566-4442 to track down artist].

#### Next Steps (ED lead):

- ED will coordinate with Parks and Health Department to further ideas to better utilize and alleviate existing rodent problems for small MBTA-owned space between Khao Sarn and Michael's Deli. This will include outreach to MBTA realty office (TRA).



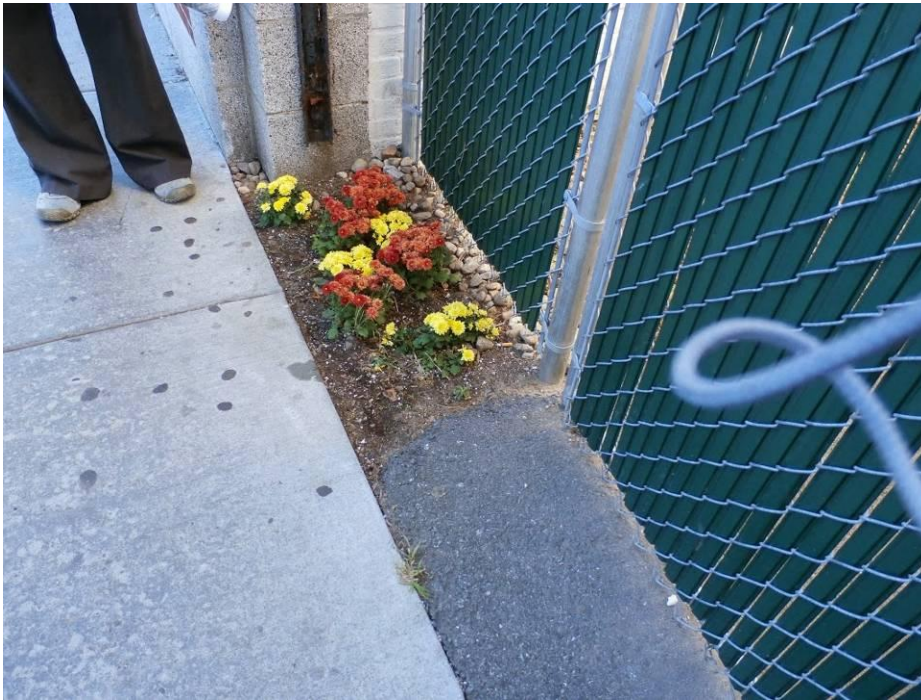




### Stringham's Gorilla Gardening (outside of Neena's Lighting)

#### Observations & Discussion:

- Following years of nagging the business owner to have the alley next to his building tidied up (palettes were stored there, trash collected, etc.), Jean asked for permission to plant some flowers in a tiny space between the sidewalk and the fence to the alley. Result: less cigarette butts collected, nicer walking experience, AND business cleaned up the alley!
- Carla noted idea from a recent trip that when business owners are called “shopkeepers” rather than “merchants”, the label carries with it a sense of ownership and responsibility to a place, not just temporarily here to vend and make money.
- Question about whether the walkway is actually a public walkway through the area [researched later; nothing in files showing that to be the case]



#### Big Ideas:

- Small efforts to make spaces better pay off and are a great method to get others into participating and having a sense of ownership and responsibility to the community as a whole

## **Triangle Park at Pleasant & Beacon Streets**

### Observations & Discussion:

- Now that benches have been replaced, people are using the park area more
- Heard a positive comment about tree design recently that “when sitting there, you feel like you’re part of the landscape” (because the surface below you continues up vertically around the tree)
- The surface around the tree makes it harder to clean out cigarette butts, etc., and may make it too difficult for wheelchairs, walkers, or even high heels to feel comfortable using.
- Maybe a small area of the tiles should get replaced with smooth surface
- Several people commented on the fantastic renovation of the benches at this park. Some wondered if design elements here could be repeated over at Marriott Triangle park to give people the sense that there are “bookends” to Coolidge Corner. Also noted that the Marriott Triangle furniture should also be integrated into Beacon Street furniture, so may be difficult to design for both conditions.
- Noted that businesses may be more willing to program an activity within a space like this if the current topography and surface smoothness was fixed first.
- Discussion about whether it is better policy to add cigarette butt holders or to simply prohibit smoking from all public spaces (including signage).
- Also mentioned how cigarette butt stand stack at Town Hall frequently catches on fire.
- Looking across at the planted areas in front of Pelham Hall, someone mentioned an idea of merchants planting their own planters or windowboxes outside their stores. It was noted that right now the process to seek permission to do so is unclear and requires bonds, insurance, etc. Merchants might also need expertise of what to plant, but our Landscape Architect already has way too much on her plate.

### Big Ideas:

- Maintenance is much more important than automatically “adding to” or “redoing” when a space doesn’t feel right.

### Next Steps (ED lead):

- An idea was discussed about requesting EDAB to help get together a group of Architects and Landscape Architects to help businesses with 1-2 hrs of free consultation for exterior decoration like this or for tenant fit-out / space planning / lighting issues within their stores.
- Maintenance and programming of public open spaces (either in front of store or in more common areas) in partnership with businesses and/or business associations, neighborhood associations.
- If and when Durgin/Waldo garages are redeveloped, consider whether rehabilitating/improving the triangle at Pleasant & Beacon Streets is a possibility.





## Coolidge Corner Library

### Observations & Discussion:

- Frank Caro worked with Library Director and Erin Gallentine, volunteered his time and many of the plantings from his house to add to the planters at the Coolidge Corner Library



### Big Ideas:

- Great example to inspire others to adopt spaces they enjoy or frequent



## Small seating area at end of John Street parking lot

### Observations & Discussion:

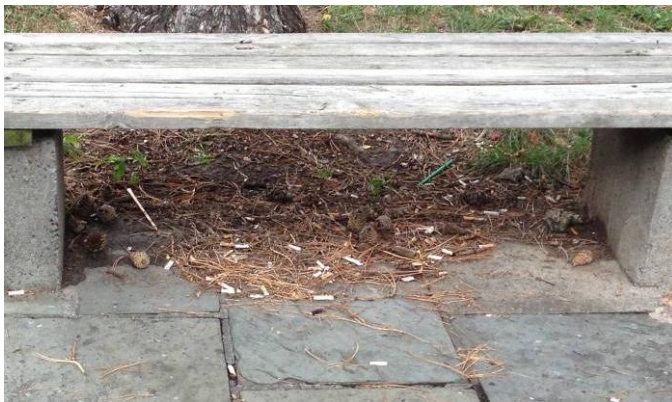
- Saw largest collection of cigarette butts around seating than anywhere else on walk
- The area could use a facelift. Residents would like to see some color in the area, but planters are extremely expensive and difficult to maintain. Idea of redesigning the space so that everyone can feel comfortable there, but primarily as an elder-friendly area first – including seating and maybe some small tables.
- The hardscape is probably fine.
- The concept of movable seating came up... again!

### Big Ideas:

- Cigarette butt holders are not likely to be installed in public areas, but maybe it's time to ban smoking all together in public spaces (with signage).

### Next Steps (Parks lead):

- Parks will work into schedule consideration of “facelift” for this space.



## **Coolidge Corner Theatre and Centre Street East, West Parking Lot**

### Observations & Discussion:

- What is the concrete post for at the front of the Coolidge Corner Theatre? Can it be removed (see photo)?
- Mulch and sidewalk edge are uneven and a potential tripping hazard in front of Upper Crust; Erin noted that this is an ongoing problem; mulch always gets kicked out immediately.
- Talked about need to better understand peak period of loading times for all the merchants on the west side of Harvard Street to understand if one box truck loading space was needed? Two? When and how to get CVS from blocking the back driveway?
- Talked about studying Centre St. lot more carefully so that when curbing is replaced, there may be a way to create a wider, more robust green path aligning with the Theatre alley towards the outdoor seating at Seven Subs. Discussion of public vs. private property lines and where/why cars are being stacked up across the sidewalk access here.
- Also discussed need to refresh seating area adjacent to Coolidge Corner west lot, which could make it more flexible for small performances or in other ways more usable during Farmers Market days. Again, moveable seating came up.
- Caution - don't plant more trees if they're just going to die. Noted poor condition of some trees in the middle of the Centre Street East parking lot and also adjacent to the building next to Beacon Way Alley.
- Some of the signage is confusing, uncared for (like the Shops with the U-turn symbol)
- Other signage on private buildings gave the idea that there could be more signage or information kiosk listing all the nearby shopping opportunities.
- Some paving and paved sidewalks, especially on the north side of the Centre Street East parking lot appears excessive or not needed.
- Trash behind The Gap building was recently a problem. Although cleaned up, the placement of the containers is not a welcoming gateway for people walking from Centre St. East towards Harvard Street.
- Mary Lynn Pergantis (we suspect) has done a great job planting a very small space at the Beacon Way alley adjacent to the Brighter Way storefront (see photo).
- The small space adjacent to the Centre Street West parking lot could use a facelift to better programmed for Farmers' Market days, or to be a bookend to the Theatre Alley "green" way idea.

### Next Steps (ED lead):

- ED will hire a civil engineer/landscape architect to further conceptual drawings for a renovated Coolidge Corner East parking lot, including discussions with Parks on how to make better use of a green spine extending from the Theatre alleyway across to the Centre Street west parking lot.





Concrete post in front of Upper Crust



Sea of pavement and small grass islands at Coolidge Corner East Parking Lot



Very wide driveway at Coolidge Corner East Parking Lot





Another island of grass & dead tree



Signage for Shops – maybe we should encourage more?



Small space next to Beacon Way Alley – public? Private? Who does/should maintain? Could it be better?



Great use of small planter along Beacon Way Alley

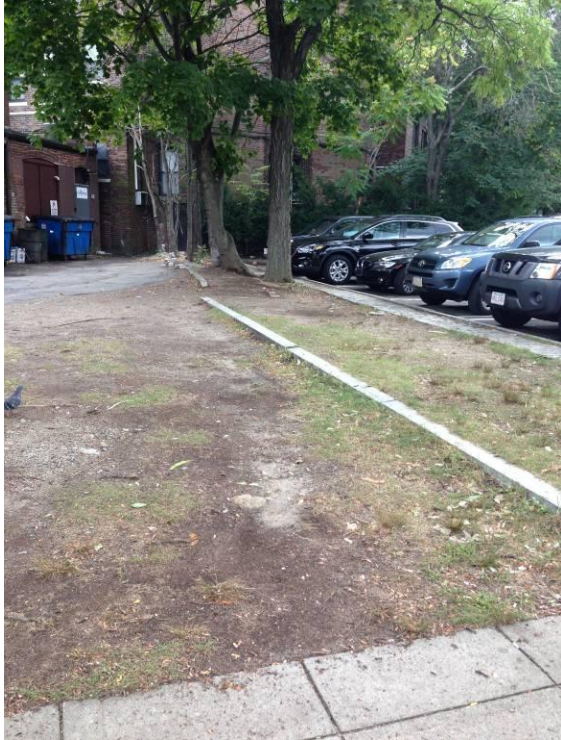


Confusing and tired signage, Centre St East lot



Trash facilities necessary but unwelcoming encroachment into alleyway behind The Gap when walking from Centre St. East lot towards Harvard Street.





Small park next to Centre St. west lot



## **Public Areas Adjacent to Devotion School**

### Observations & Discussion:

- The group did NOT visit this space on September 8<sup>th</sup>. However, it was part of Jean Stringham's walk with Kara previously. Erin and Kara have also discussed this area before.

### Next Steps (Parks lead):

- When the school department is ready to discuss specific Devotion School designs, Parks and ED will provide suggestions on ways that open spaces could be better used for the area.



Three benches were destroyed in winter a couple years ago (?) but not replaced. Although not photographed here, this is also true for space nearest J.P. Licks.



Signage for park is confusing and does not feel like a usable public park, except for exclusive school use.

8-6 on the weekends as well? Could the exclusive school use be located on the more residential side (closer to Beals Street), and this space be more open and usable for people using commercial areas?